

TESTIMONY OF JENNIFER ERIKSSON BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS SUB COMMITTEE  
Department of Rehabilitative Services Budget (DORS)  
LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING, FEBRUARY 16, 2017

Good evening, members of the committee. My name is Jennifer Eriksson; I am from Manchester Connecticut. I am a person with multiple disabilities, including learning difficulties, and I am here tonight to advocate for funding for Connecticut's Independent Living Centers in the 2018-2019 state budget. Independent Living Centers are one-stop resource centers where people with disabilities can gain vital information about what their rights are and learn practical skills such as budgeting, disaster preparedness skills, and how to manage Personal Care Assistants.

Connecticut's Independent Living Centers are open and affirming, and welcome all people regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, physical or mental disability. This creates a supportive environment for consumers and employees alike and allows everyone to reach their fullest potential. In addition to the thousands of Connecticut residents that the ILC's assisted with things like information and referral services, peer counseling, and housing, in 2016 alone, they also helped an additional 128 consumers obtain or maintain employment. I know this personally because, I was one of them.

In my unique journey at Independence Unlimited, in Hartford, I have had an opportunity to view the positive work conducted by the agency from many perspectives; beginning as a consumer, working as an intern while pursuing my Master's Degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling, and as a former employee, where I was able to assist members of the disability community in accessing the vital services necessary to maintain the highest level of independence possible; something that all residents of our State wish to have.

My learning difficulties sometimes make it challenging for me to express myself in writing. I went to Independence Unlimited and was given peer counseling and pre-employment skills training that were invaluable to me. Working with my advocate, I was able to put together a resume and a cover letter that helped me competently share my knowledge and abilities with both potential employers and professors, as I went to work and school, attempting to advance in my career field. As an intern at IU, I was treated with respect. And, rather than being looked down upon for having a disability, which is something I have often experienced in past places of employment, my disability was viewed as an asset. This allowed me to use my knowledge base from my schooling to grow into a competent professional, without fear of judgment or criticism of my abilities. In my time as an employee, I was able to utilize what I learned as both a consumer and an intern, as well as my experience as a peer and professional, to assist people with disabilities in maintaining their independence and preventing premature entry into a nursing home or other institution. Now, as I move on to other opportunities in my career field, I am hopeful that IU will be able to continue providing me with the support I need to be successful.

There is no doubt that we are facing tough economic times right now but, Independent Living Centers need funding so that people with disabilities in Connecticut can continue to have access to critically important resources and the help that they need to have purposeful lives and careers and to be able to contribute socially, professionally, and financially to the well-being of our State. I am asking you to please restore funding to the Independent Living Centers in the 2018-2019 budget so that, not only can people with disabilities in Connecticut continue to have access to critically important resources but, so that I can continue to achieve what every person with a disability strives for; a purposeful life and career that allow me to contribute socially, professionally, and financially to the well-being of our State. Thank you very much for your time.